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CHAPTER ONE

*The preface of St. Luke to his Gospel.
Concerning the parents of John the Baptist, and his birth.
Concerning the angel's salutation to Mary.
Concerning Mary's salutation to Elizabeth.*

1-4. Forasmuch as many have attempted to set forth in order an account of those things which are confidently believed among us, even as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having carefully searched out all these things from the beginning, to write them in order unto thee, most excellent Theophilus, that thou mightest better know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed. Who were these *many* who attempted to set forth in order an account? The false apostles. For there were many who wrote so-called "gospels," for example, "The gospel according to the Egyptians," and "The gospel of the twelve." But these false apostles only attempted to set forth; they did not finish and perfect their narratives because they began without divine grace. Luke therefore says well that *many have attempted*. Only a few, such as Matthew and Mark, not only attempted to set forth, but finished and perfected their narrative. For they had the Holy Spirit, Which perfects. He speaks of *things which are confidently believed*. These things concerning Christ's life are not simply facts heard from another, but rather are received by tradition, in truth, with sure faith, and with all confidence. Tell us, Luke, how can these things be so confidently believed? Because *they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word*. From this it is clear that Luke was not a disciple from the beginning, but at a later time. Others were disciples from the beginning, like those with Peter and the sons of Zebedee, and it is they who handed down to Luke those things which he himself had not seen or heard. What does it mean, *that thou mightest better know the certainty of those things, wherein thou hast been instructed*? This can be understood in two ways. The Evangelist is saying, "Formerly, O Theophilus, I instructed you by word of mouth; but now I pass on the Gospel to you in writing in order to fix those things in your memory so that you do not forget what was passed on to you by word of mouth." Another meaning is this: when

someone tells us something by word of mouth, we often suspect that perhaps he is inaccurate. But if he then confirms it in writing, we believe, since he would not have put it in writing unless he was convinced that he was speaking the truth. So, in the same vein, the Evangelist is saying, "For this reason have I written this Gospel for you, that you might have greater assurance of those things in which you have been instructed by word of mouth, believing me now all the more, because I am so confident of what I taught by word of mouth that I now set them forth in writing." Take note of the word *know*. Luke did not say, "that thou mightest know [*gnōs*]," but *that thou mightest better know* [*epignōs*], that is, receive even greater knowledge the second time, and have boldness and certainty that I speak the truth.

5. There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia: and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. He mentions Herod the king, first of all, because he was following the form used by the prophet, who began in this same manner, saying for instance, *There was in the days of Jotham and Ahaz and Hezekiah*.¹ Moreover, because he is about to speak about Christ, he mentions Herod to show that Christ truly came during the time of Herod. For this Herod was king when the line of the kings of Judah had failed, according to the prophecy of Jacob,² and thus the coming of the Messiah is indicated. And something more is accomplished by mentioning Herod. By fixing the time, he shows the truth of the Gospel. He enables those who so desire to investigate for themselves, and from the time given, to discover the truth of the Gospel. He begins with Zacharias and the birth of John, and rightly so. For he is about to speak of the birth of Christ, and since John was the Forerunner of Christ, it is fitting that he recount the birth of John before the birth of Christ. Nor is the birth of John without miracles. Since a Virgin was about to give birth, the grace of God foreordained that an old woman should give birth, not according to the law of nature, but still by a man. What does this mean, *of the course of Abia*? Some understand it thus: there were two priests who each served in turn, one named Abia, and the

¹ See Hos. 1:1.

² Gen. 49:10

other, Zacharias. After Abia had finished serving his course as priest, then Zacharias served. But it does not appear to have been this way. When Solomon finished building the temple, he also established *courses*,³ that is, [assignments of those who would serve each] week.⁴ For one week he appointed, perhaps, the sons of Kore, and for the next week, the sons of Asaph, and the next week, the sons of Abia, and so forth. Therefore, *Zacharias, of the course of Abia*, ought to be interpreted thus: Zacharias was of the week of service assigned to Abia.⁵ Zacharias did not perform his priestly service after the week in which Abia served, for then Luke would have said that Zacharias was "after" the course of Abia; instead he says that Zacharias was *of the course of Abia*, showing that he belonged to Abia's division of priests appointed to serve for a week. Luke says, *his wife was of the daughters of Aaron*, wanting to show that John was descended on both sides from the priestly tribe, in accordance with the law, which commands that a man marry a wife of none other than his own tribe. *Elizabeth* means *God's rest*, and *Zacharias* means *the memory of the Lord*.

6. And they were both righteous in the sight of God. Many are *righteous*, not in the sight of God, but only in appearance, in the sight of men. But these were righteous before God. **Walking in all the commandments and judgments of the law blameless.** The *commandments* are, for example, *Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal.* The *judgments* are, for example, *He that revileth his father or his mother shall surely die.*⁶ For this is right and just. Know then that a *commandment* can also be called a *judgment*, because it makes man righteous, and because it is indeed the judgment of God.⁷ On the day when God will judge us, He will hold the commandments like a written judgment [either

³ *Ephēmeria*, *course*, means literally, [service] for a day.

⁴ I Chron. 23:6 and 28:13.

⁵ I Chron. 24:10

⁶ Ex. 21:16

⁷ The Greek word *entolē*, translated in the text as *commandment*, implies that which has been expressly ordered by the mouth of authority. By contrast, the Greek word *dikaiōma*, translated here as *judgement*, refers to that which has been judged to be right [*dikaiois*] and therefore has the force of law.

for or against us]. For He says, *If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin.*⁸ And again, *The word which I have spoken, the same shall judge him on the last day.*⁹ Why does Luke add the word *blameless* to the text, *walking in all the commandments*? Listen: many walk in the law of God, but they do so in order to be seen by men. Such as these are not blameless. But Zacharias kept the commandments, and kept them blamelessly, not doing them to please men.

7. And they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both now advanced in years. Righteous women, and the wives of righteous men, were often childless. You, O reader, should learn from this that the law did not command that one bear many offspring, but rather that one bear much spiritual fruit. Both of them were advanced, in body and also in spirit. They had matured and progressed in soul, making ascents in their hearts,¹⁰ keeping their lives in the day, not in the night, as those who walk honestly in the light.¹¹

8-10. And it came to pass, that while he executeth the priest's office before God in the order of his course, according to the custom of the priest's office, his lot was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the time of incense. Only the pure serve as priests *before God*, Who turns His face away from those who are not pure. When was it his lot to burn incense? It was certainly at the time of Atonement, when the high priest alone entered the Holy of Holies. From this we learn that just as this high priest received offspring when he entered the Holy of Holies, so too the Lord Jesus, in truth the only and the great High Priest, when He entered the Holy of Holies, that is, when He ascended and entered into heaven in the flesh, received the fruit of His visitation among us in the flesh, namely, our adoption as sons and our salvation.

⁸ Jn. 15:22

⁹ Jn. 12:48

¹⁰ See Ps. 83:6.

¹¹ See Rom. 13:13.

11. And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. An angel does not appear to everyone, but only to the pure of heart, such as Zacharias. The Evangelist says, *the altar of incense*, because there was another altar, the altar of whole burnt offerings.

12-14. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him. But the angel said unto him, Fear not, Zacharias: for thy prayer is heard; and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son, and thou shalt call his name John. And thou shalt have joy and gladness; and many shall rejoice at his birth. Zacharias was troubled, for the sight of something extraordinary is troubling even to the saints. But the angel dispels the fear. There is always this sign which distinguishes between visions that are from God and visions that are from demons: if the mind at first is troubled, but ends by being calm after the fear has been swiftly dispelled, indeed it is a divine vision. But if the fear and disquietude increase more and more, then the vision is demonic. What was the prayer of Zacharias which caused the angel to say, *thy prayer is heard, and thy wife Elizabeth shall bear thee a son*? Surely Zacharias was not praying for a son. Was he not praying for the sins of the people?¹² Some say, therefore, that on account of his prayer for the sins of the people, he would beget a son who would cry out, *Behold the Lamb of God, Which taketh away the sin of the world.*¹³ Thus it is altogether fitting that the angel says to him, *thy prayer is heard*, meaning, "thy prayer for the forgiveness of the sins of the people. Thou shalt beget a son through whom there will be forgiveness of sins." But others understand it this way: "*Thy prayer is heard*, O Zacharias, and God has forgiven the sins of the people." Then, as if Zacharias had asked, "How can we know this is so?" the angel says to him, "I give thee this sign, that Elizabeth shall bear thee a son. By Elizabeth's childbearing thou shalt believe that the sins of the people have been forgiven."

15-17. For he shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the

¹² See Heb. 9:7.

¹³ Jn. 1:29

Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous; to prepare for the Lord a people made ready. The angel promises that John will be truly great, that is, great *in the sight of the Lord*. For there are many who are called great in the sight of men, but are not so in the sight of God. Such are the hypocrites. John was great in soul, unlike those easily offended ones who are little in soul. No one who is great is offended, but only those who are little in soul and have little faith. This is why the Lord says, *Whoso shall offend one of these little ones*.¹⁴ Just as the parents of John were righteous in the sight of the Lord, so their child was great in the sight of the Lord. *Strong drink [sikera]* is any intoxicating drink that is not of the vine. While yet in his mother's womb he was filled with the Holy Spirit, when the mother of the Lord came to Elizabeth and *the babe leaped in her womb*, rejoicing at the Lord's coming. And he turned *the hearts of the fathers to the children*, meaning, he turned the hearts of the Hebrews to the apostles. *The fathers* were the Jews, and their *children* were the apostles. Therefore he turned the hearts of the Jews to the apostles, teaching them of Christ, and bearing witness to Him. By bearing witness to Christ, a teacher makes his own disciples ready for faith. John did turn the hearts of *many*, but not of all. But the Lord enlightened all. John went before Christ *in the spirit* of Elijah, meaning, just as grace was at work in Elijah, so too was grace at work in John. For Elijah is the forerunner of the second coming of Christ, while John is the Forerunner of the first coming. And John went before Him *in the power* of Elijah, for the advents of both Elijah and John have the same power, that is, they both lead together to Christ. In another sense John went *in the spirit and power of Elijah*, in that John too was a desert dweller, living without any excess, and he rebuked and reproved as did Elijah. And he turned the disobedient Jews *to the wisdom of the righteous*, that is, to the teaching of the apostles. For the wisdom of the apostles was the grace of the Spirit working in them and governing them. He *prepared for the Lord*, that is, for Christ, *a people made ready* to receive the preaching. For example, when a prophet

¹⁴ Mt. 18:5

would come preaching, not all would believe, but only those who had made themselves ready to receive that preaching. It is like a man who enters a house by night. Not every one in the house welcomes him, but only those who are awake and have been expecting him and are prepared to welcome him. Likewise John prepared a people for the Lord, not from among the disobedient, but rather of those who had made themselves ready to welcome the Christ.

18-20. And Zacharias said unto the angel, Whereby shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is far advanced in years. And the angel answering said unto him, I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I am sent to speak unto thee, and to bring unto thee these good tidings. And, behold, thou shalt be in silence, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall come to pass, because thou believest not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season. Though Zacharias was righteous and holy, when he considered this awesome miracle of childbearing, he could not easily believe. This is why the angel reveals himself, saying, *"I am Gabriel, who stand in the presence of God"*, not a deceiving demon but an angel of God. Since you do not believe, you shall be deaf and unable to speak." It was fitting that Zacharias suffered these two things, the inability either to hear or to speak. For not giving heed, he was chastened with deafness; and for speaking back, he was chastened with muteness. But Zacharias also foreshadowed what would happen with the Jews. Although he was old and barren of fruit and did not believe, Zacharias begat a son greater than all the prophets. Likewise the assembly and the priesthood of the Jews had grown old, becoming fruitless, unbelieving, and disobedient; nevertheless this people gave birth in the flesh to God the Word, the Master of the prophets. And when Christ was born, those who before had been disobedient came to believe and to confess with a strong voice.

21-23. And the people waited for Zacharias, and marvelled that he tarried so long in the temple. And when he came out, he could not speak unto them: and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple: for he beckoned unto them, and remained speechless. And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his serving were accomplished, he departed to his own house. Do you see how the Jews were

waiting expectantly until the high priest should come out of the temple? But we Christians, if we do not leave church almost as soon as we have entered it, think that we are suffering terribly. Zacharias beckoned to the people who perhaps were asking why he was silent, and he showed them with a gesture that he could not speak. See that he did not depart to his house until the days of his service were completed, but he remained in the temple. The *hill country*, [v. 39,] where Zacharias lived, was indeed some distance away from Jerusalem, but even if the priest had his house in Jerusalem, he was not permitted to leave the court of the temple during the time of his appointed service. But alas! how we neglect our service to God! The inability of Zacharias to speak and his wordless signals to the people foreshadow the way of life of those Jews who are without the Word. Having slain the Word, they have no word to give in answer for what they do and say, and if you ask them something concerning the prophecies of Christ, they are speechless and unable to give you either word or answer.

24-25. And after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying, Thus hath the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein He looked on me, to take away my reproach among men. Elizabeth was chaste and modest, and she hid herself because she had conceived in her old age. She hid herself for five months, until Mary also had conceived. But when Mary too had conceived, and Elizabeth's babe had leaped in her womb, she no longer hid herself, but became more bold as the mother of such a child, which even before its birth had been honored with the rank of prophet.

26-30. And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Rejoice, thou who art full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. *The sixth month* means the sixth month after John's conception. The Evangelist says that the virgin was *betrothed to a man of the house of David*, to show that she too was descended from the tribe

and lineage of David.¹⁵ For it was the law that husband and wife should be of the same tribe and the same lineage. Because the Lord had once said to Eve, *In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children*,¹⁶ that sorrow is now removed by the joy which the angel offers to the woman, saying to her, *Rejoice, thou who art full of grace*. Since Eve had been cursed, now Mary hears herself *blessed*. She considered in her mind what sort of salutation this might be: surely not an unseemly and provocative greeting as from a forward man to a young maiden? Or was it perhaps a divine salutation, since God was mentioned together with the greeting, *The Lord is with thee*. First the angel calms the fear in her heart, so that she might hear the divine decision when she was peaceful and untroubled. While she was troubled, she would not be able to hear and understand clearly the things that would take place. When the angel said to her, *Thou who art full of grace*, it is as if he were saying, "Thou hast found grace and favor in the sight of God, and thou art pleasing to God." This is not out of the ordinary, for there were many other women who had found favor with God. But what the angel says next has never before been heard:

31-33. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call His name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High: and the Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David: and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of His kingdom there shall be no end. *Behold, thou shalt conceive*—this is extraordinary, something of which no other virgin has been deemed worthy. The angel said, *in thy womb*, to show that the Lord actually took flesh from the very womb of the Virgin. It was right that He Who came for the salvation of our race was called *Jesus*. The name written in the Greek language, *Iēsous*, means *salvation from God*. Therefore, *Jesus*, being interpreted, is *Saviour*, for the word *Iaō* means *salvation*. *He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Most High*. John also was great, but he was not the Son of the Most High. But the Saviour was great in His teaching, and was the Son of the Most High, as shown by the authority with which He taught and the marvelous wonders which He worked. He Who appears as a man is

¹⁵ See Vol. 1, *The Explanation of St. Matthew*, p. 17.

¹⁶ Gen. 3:17

called the Son of the Most High; being of one hypostasis, the human son of the Virgin is in truth the Son of the Most High. Even before the ages the Word was the Son of the Most High, although He was not called or known as such. But when He became incarnate and appeared in the flesh, then He was called the Son of the Most High, Who has appeared and works wonders. When you hear *the throne of David*, do not understand this to mean a kingdom perceivable by the senses, but instead a divine kingship which He wields over all the nations through the divine proclamation of the Gospel. *The house of Jacob* means those of the Jews who believed; but indeed it also means those of the other nations who believed. In truth both the believing Jews and the believing Gentiles are *Jacob* [before he encountered God] and *Israel* [the same man after he saw God].¹⁷ What does it mean, to sit on the throne of David? Listen: David was the smallest among his brothers,¹⁸ and the Lord also was belittled and slandered as an eater and drinker and a son of a carpenter,¹⁹ and was held in dishonor by His brothers, the sons of Joseph. *For neither did His brethren believe in Him*, the Gospel says.²⁰ David was persecuted by Saul for doing good,²¹ and when the Lord worked wonders, He was slandered and stoned.²² David conquered and reigned through meekness, and the Lord, through meekness, accepted the Cross and ruled as King. Do you see what it means, to sit on the throne of David? Just as David received a physical kingdom, so too the Lord receives a spiritual kingdom, which shall have no end. There shall be no end to the kingdom of Christ, that is, no end to the knowledge of God or to Christianity. For when we are persecuted, we shine with the grace of Christ.

34-35. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee: therefore also that Holy Thing Which is

¹⁷ Gen. 32:28-30.

¹⁸ See Ps. [151]:1.

¹⁹ Mt. 11:19, 13:55; Mk. 6:3.

²⁰ Jn. 7:5

²¹ See I Kings 18-24.

²² Jn. 10:31

begotten of thee shall be called the Son of God. It was not because the Virgin did not believe that she said, *How shall this be?* Rather, it was because she was wise and astute, and sought to understand the manner in which this would take place. For nothing like this had ever happened before, nor would it again. This is why the angel forgives her, and does not chastise her as he did Zacharias, but instead explains to her how it would come about. It was fitting that Zacharias was chastised, for he knew many examples of barren women who had given birth. But for the Virgin, there was no precedent. *The Holy Spirit*, he says, *shall come upon thee*, rendering thy womb fertile, and creating flesh for the Word Which is one in essence with the Father. *The power of the Most High*, that is, the Son of God, for Christ is the power of God,²³ *shall overshadow thee*, encompassing thee about from all sides. Just as the hen overshadows her chicks, taking them all in under her wings, so too the power of God completely encompassed the Virgin. This is what it means to *overshadow*. Someone else perhaps will say that just as a painter first shadows in the image and then completes it with color, likewise the Lord, in creating flesh for Himself and fashioning the icon of man, first drew the shadow of the image in the womb of the Virgin, incorporating flesh from the blood of the Ever Virgin, and then little by little gave it form. But this is unclear. Some say that when the Lord *overshadowed* the Virgin in her womb, immediately there was a completed infant. But others do not accept this. Listen to what the angel says: *Therefore also that Holy Thing Which is begotten of thee*,²⁴ in other words, that Holy Thing Which is growing within your womb in extraordinary manner, and does not at once exist in completed form. Here the mouth of Nestorius is sealed. For that man said that the Son of God did not take flesh by dwelling in the womb of the Virgin, but that a mere man was born of Mary, and only later was this man “accompanied” by God. Let Nestorius hear, therefore, that *that Holy Thing* Which is being begotten in the womb is the Son of God. That

²³ I Cor. 1:24

²⁴ *To gennōmenon*, here translated as *Which is begotten*, is the present passive participle of the verb *gennaō*, which means “to beget, to bear, to bring forth.” The single Greek word encompasses the entire nine month process from conception to giving birth. The interpretation which Blessed Theophylact provides depends upon the force of the Greek present passive participle, which could be more literally expressed in English by the phrase “that Holy Thing Which is being begotten,” or “Which is being brought forth.”

which was carried in the womb and the Son of God are not two separate entities, but one and the same, the Son of the Virgin and the Son of God. See how the angel revealed the Holy Trinity by naming the Holy Spirit, the *Power* which is the Son, and the *Most High* which is the Father.

36-38. And, behold, thy kinswoman Elizabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her. One might wonder how Elizabeth could be a relative of the Virgin since the Virgin was of the tribe of Judah, while Elizabeth was one of the daughters of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi. The law commanded that marriage take place within the same tribe, with the result that kinsfolk are of the same tribe as well. It might be said that there was a confusion of the tribes during the time of the Babylonian captivity. But a better explanation is this: Aaron married a woman named Elizabeth, who was the daughter of Aminidab who was of the tribe of Judah.²⁵ Do you see that from the beginning, through Aaron, the Theotokos was a kinswoman of Elizabeth? Since the wife of Aaron was of the tribe of Judah, as was the Theotokos, and Elizabeth was from the daughters of Aaron, Elizabeth is rightly said to be a kinswoman of the Theotokos. This is because Elizabeth's foremother, the wife of Aaron, was of the tribe of Judah. Consider also the parallel of this kinship: the wife of Aaron was Elizabeth, and her descendant, the wife of Zacharias, was also Elizabeth. But let us hear what the Virgin says. *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.* I am a writer's tablet; let the Writer write upon it whatever He wishes. Let the Lord do as He wills. [From this we can see] that what she said earlier, *How shall this be?* was not spoken out of disbelief, but out of the desire to understand how it would occur. If she had not believed, she would not have said, *Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.* Learn that *Gabriel* means *man-God*, *Mary* means *mistress*, and *Nazareth* means *sanctification*. It is fitting that when God was about to become man, Gabriel, *man-God*, was sent. And the salutation of Mary occurred in a holy place, in Nazareth.

²⁵ Ex. 6:23

Where God is, there is nothing unholy.

39-42. And Mary arose in those days, and went into the hill country with haste, into a city of Judah; and entered into the house of Zacharias, and saluted Elizabeth. And it came to pass, that, when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit: and she spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. When the Virgin heard from the angel that Elizabeth had conceived, she ran to her, not only rejoicing at the good fortune of her relative, but also, being most wise, because she wanted to make completely sure that the one who had appeared to her had spoken the truth, and thus be free of any doubt concerning herself. Although she was certain, she was afraid that she might be in a state of delusion and prelest. It was not that she disbelieved, but that she wanted to understand the matter more clearly. Zacharias lived in the hill country, and this is why she ran there. John, having received a gift of grace far exceeding what others had received, leaps in the womb of his mother, thus showing that he is greater than the prophets. For they prophesied after they themselves were born, but he was deemed worthy of such grace that he prophesied while yet in his mother's womb. Look: the Virgin salutes Elizabeth, that is, greets her. But the voice of the Virgin is here the voice of God Who is taking on flesh within her. This is why the voice of salutation also gladdens the Forerunner in the womb, and causes him to prophesy. The words which Elizabeth speaks prophetically to Mary are not her own words, but are the words of the babe within her who speaks through the mouth of Elizabeth, just as the Son of God in the womb speaks through the mouth of Mary. For the babe leaped within the womb, and then Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. If the babe had not leaped, then Elizabeth would not have prophesied. In the same way it is said that prophets first undergo ecstasy and divine rapture, and then begin to prophesy, so too John first leaped, moved by this same excitement, and then prophesied through the mouth of his mother. What did he prophesy? *Blessed art thou among women.* And then, since many holy women have given birth to profane offspring, as when Rebecca bore Esau, he added, *and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.* But it can also be understood in another way. *Blessed art thou among women.* And then, as if someone had asked, "Why?" he gives the answer, "For *blessed is the*

fruit of thy womb,” that is, the fruit of thy womb is God, and God alone is blessed, as David says, *Blessed is He that cometh.*²⁶ In Scripture, the conjunction “and” is commonly used instead of “for”. For example, *Give us help from affliction, and vain is the salvation of man,*” meaning, “for vain is the salvation of men.”²⁷ And again, *Behold, Thou wast angry and we have sinned,* instead of “for we have sinned.”²⁸ He says that the Lord is the fruit of the womb of the Theotokos, because the conception is without a man. All other children are called the “fruit” of their fathers’ [loins], but Christ is the fruit solely of the womb of the Theotokos. She conceived Him without the aid of any man.

43-45. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed that there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord. Just as John later tried, out of reverence, to prevent Christ from coming to him to be baptized, saying, *I am not worthy,*²⁹ so too now John utters the words, through the mouth of his mother, *Whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?* Before she had given birth to the Lord, he names the pregnant woman *the mother*. But with other pregnant women, before they have given birth they ought not to be called “mother”, out of fear they might miscarry. With the Virgin, however, there was no such fear. Therefore, even before childbirth, O Mary, thou art *mother* and *blessed*, having believed that there shall be a fulfillment of those things which were spoken to thee from the Lord.

46-50. And Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For He hath regarded the low estate of His handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all

²⁶ Ps. 117:25

²⁷ Ps. 107:13. In the Septuagint the Greek word *kai*, with the literal meaning of ‘and’, is used. However, “for” appears in the English translation (of Holy Transfiguration Monastery) because the sense requires it, the very point here made by Bl. Theophylact.

²⁸ Is. 64:5

²⁹ Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:7.

generations shall bless me. For the Mighty One hath done to me great things; and Holy is His Name. And His mercy is on them that fear Him from generation to generation. Now that she had certainty, the Virgin glorifies God, ascribing the miracle to Him and not to herself. God, she says, has looked down upon me who am lowly; it is not I who looked up to Him. It is God Who had mercy on me, not I who sought Him out. And from henceforth, not only Elizabeth, but *all generations* of believers *shall bless me*. Why shall they bless me? Because of my virtue? No, but rather because God *hath done to me great things*. She calls God *Mighty* so that no one would disbelieve these words, thinking that God had not the power to do these things. She says that His Name is *Holy*, showing that He Who is most pure was not stained in any way by having been conceived in the womb of a woman, but He remains Holy. His mercy is not only upon me, but upon all those who fear Him. But those unworthy ones who do not fear Him do not benefit from His mercy. By saying that the mercy of God is *from generation to generation*, she shows that those who fear Him receive God’s mercy not only in this present generation, that is, in this present age, but also in the generation to come, I mean, in the age without end. Even in this life they receive His mercy a hundredfold, and in the next life, how much more? Notice that first the soul magnifies the Lord, and then the spirit rejoices. He magnifies God who lives in a manner worthy of God. But you, O reader, who are called a Christian, do not do the opposite and belittle the dignity of Christ and the name of Christian by doing what you should not do, but rather magnify Him with magnificent and heavenly deeds. And then your spirit will rejoice as well, that is, the gift of the spirit which you received to enable you to do magnificent deeds, will leap up and increase, and not wane and die out. Understand that Scripture, at a simple level, appears to identify *spirit* [*pneuma*] and *soul* [*psychē*] as one, but strictly speaking it differentiates between them.³⁰ Scripture calls that man *natural* [*psychikon*] [whose life is motivated by the soul, that is, the life force, and] who

³⁰ *Psychē* in Greek, *anima* in Latin, and *soul* in English, all denote the life force of man and of every living creature. The soul is that which “animates” the body. But man has both soul and spirit. The soul, being the “bridge” between the body and the spirit, may seem indistinguishable from the spirit, but it is not. Bl. Theophylact is here correcting this confusion. A pious and most illuminating discussion of the two separate entities, soul and spirit, is to be found in *The Law of God*, Archpriest Seraphim Slobodskoy, Holy Trinity Monastery, Jordanville, New York, 1993, pp. 100-103.

lives according to his physical nature, and is governed only by human thoughts as, for example, when he is hungry, or thirsty, or hates his enemy, and, in short, imagines nothing loftier than his own nature. But Scripture names that man *spiritual* [*pneumatikon*] who transcends the laws of his human nature, and thinks nothing that is merely human.³¹ This is the difference in Scripture between the soul and the spirit. Perhaps physicians judge these things differently; our concern is Scripture. Let the physicians attend to their own work.

51-56. He hath showed strength with His arm; He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things, and the rich He hath sent empty away. He hath holpen His servant Israel, in remembrance of His mercy; as He spake to our fathers, to Abraham, and to His seed for ever. And Mary abode with her about three months, and returned to her own house. The *arm* of the Father is the Son. Therefore God the Father, with His Son, hath showed strength and power over the order of nature. For when the Son took flesh, nature was overthrown, a Virgin gave birth, God became man, and man became God. And the Lord has *scattered the proud* demons, casting them out of the souls of men, sending some into the abyss and others into the swine. This can also be understood to refer to the unbelieving Jews, whom the Lord scattered into every land, where they are still scattered today. *He hath put down the mighty from their seats*, meaning, the demons who were tyrannizing mankind and using human souls as the seats upon which they rested. The Pharisees were also *mighty*. They plundered from the poor, and they occupied a seat, the chair of teaching, but they have been deposed. And God has exalted the lowly, meaning either those whom sin had brought low, or, the Gentiles. He has exalted them, granting them the gift of adoption as sons. And the Gentiles were also *the hungry*, for they had neither the Scriptures, the law, nor the commandments. He filled them with the good things of the Scriptures; but the unbelieving Jews, who were rich in the law and in the commandments, He has sent away from

³¹ See, for example, I Cor. 2:14-15, where the Apostle Paul contrasts *the natural man* [*psychikos anthrōpos*] with *the spiritual man* [*pneumatikos anthrōpos*].

both the heavenly and the earthly Jerusalem, empty of every good thing. Though they think they have everything, lacking Christ they have nothing. He has helped His servant Israel, meaning the Israelites in both the physical and the spiritual sense. It is true in the physical sense, in that tens of thousands of the Israelites believed in Christ, and the promise that God spoke to Abraham was fulfilled, namely, that *in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed*.³² But in the spiritual sense, everyone who sees God is Israel, for the name *Israel* means *seeing God*. The Lord has helped those who see God, leading them upwards to their heavenly inheritance. Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months, and then returned. When Elizabeth was about to give birth, the Virgin departed, because of the many women who would gather to assist at the birthing, and it did not befit a virgin to mingle with them. That the Virgin indeed returned to her own house when Elizabeth was about to give birth is clear from this: the angel came to Mary at the sixth month of the conception of the Forerunner. Mary abode with Elizabeth about three months. Behold, nine months.

57-64. Now the time was fulfilled that Elizabeth should give birth; and she brought forth a son. And her neighbours and kinsfolk heard how the Lord had showed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all. And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, blessing God. The Virgin abode with Elizabeth about three months, perhaps because she was overwhelmed with amazement at the great miracle, and needed to regain her calm by being with Elizabeth. But she departed when the time of the birth drew near. *Now the time was fulfilled that Elizabeth should give birth*. See that only at the birth of a righteous

³² Gen. 22:18

man is it said that *the time was fulfilled* for him to be born.³³ This cannot be said of sinners. Their birth is, as it were, unfulfilled, empty, and without purpose; it would have been better for them had they never been born. Why was the name given after the circumcision? Because it was necessary first to receive God's seal, and then the human name. In another sense, circumcision symbolizes the casting off of fleshly things. Therefore he who has not first cast off, and circumcised, the flesh, is unworthy to be called the warrior of God, and to have his name enrolled in the book of heaven. Elizabeth spoke as a prophetess concerning the name, when she said, *His name is John*. Perhaps John gave himself this name, speaking prophetically through his mother. Not able to communicate the child's name by means of a gesture, Zacharias asked for a writing tablet. And when he agreed with his wife concerning the name of the child, they were all astonished. For there was no one of that name in their family, and so it could not be said that either parent had intended before this time to give him this name. *John* means *the grace of God*. And this is why John's father was immediately filled with grace as well, and prophesied first of Christ and then of the child.

65-75. And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judea. And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him. And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed His people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David; as He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets of old: that we should be saved from our enemies, and from the hand of all that hate us; to perform mercy to our fathers, and to remember His holy covenant; the oath which He sware to our father Abraham: that He would grant unto us, that we, having been delivered without fear out of the hand of our enemies, might serve Him in holiness and righteousness in His sight all the days of our life. Fear came on all because of the extraordinary manner in which Zacharias suddenly began to speak. Just as the people

³³ See Lk. 2:6 regarding the Birth of Christ.

were astounded by his silence, so now they are astounded when he speaks, so that by means of these two miracles everyone would understand that the child which had been born was not an ordinary child. All these things took place by divine economy, so that he who was to bear witness concerning Christ would be believed by others, and so that everyone would be assured by the circumstances of John's birth that he was no ordinary man. Zacharias blesses God for having visited the Israelites, for He indeed came to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but most of them did not wish to accept this gracious gift. Therefore He visited the true Israelites, those who did believe. *He hath raised up an horn of salvation*, that is, His saving power and kingship. The horned beast is strong on account of its horn and thus the horn is an emblem of power. It is also an emblem of kingship because kings are anointed with oil poured out from a horn. Christ, therefore, is both the power and the kingship of the Father, and it is Christ Who was raised up for us as our horn of salvation. He appeared to sleep, while He overlooked many sins and endured man's madness for idolatry. But in the latter times He put an end to His long-suffering and was roused from [what appeared to be] sleep. And He took flesh, and was raised up, and crushed all the demons who had such hatred for us. He was raised up in the house of David, that is, He was born in Bethlehem, which is the city of David, as the prophets said. For all the prophets spoke of the Incarnation. Micah even mentions the house of David, I mean, Bethlehem, when he says, *And thou, O Bethlehem, art by no means least. For from out of thee shall come a ruler*.³⁴ He has shown mercy, not only to those living, but also to our fathers. For the grace of Christ also reached back to those who had already died. He has given to us, the living, the hope of resurrection, and we will be raised from the dead. We are not the only ones who will be counted worthy of this grace, but also those who have died before us. All of our nature has obtained this great good. And in another way has He *performed mercy to our fathers*. He has fulfilled their hopes. All that they had longed for, they saw accomplished in Christ. Indeed, when the fathers see their children enjoying such good things, they rejoice, and by sharing in their children's joy, they accept God's mercy for themselves. What was the covenant, and what was the oath to Abraham, which He *remembered*?

³⁴ See Micah 5:2.

Surely it was *Blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee*.³⁵ In truth Abraham has now been multiplied, in that, through faith, all the nations have been adopted as His sons. Just as Abraham believed, so too have all these others been made members of his household through faith. Christ has delivered us from our enemies, *without fear*. It often happens that rescues are made, but they are accompanied by fear and a great struggle, even warfare. But Christ was crucified for us, and we did not have to struggle at all. Therefore He delivered us *without fear*, that is, our rescue was without peril to us. And why did He deliver us? So that we could live a life of revelry and feasting? No, but that we might serve and worship Him, not one or two days, but all the days of our life. We must serve God, not only waiting upon Him bodily in worship and in service, but also, *in holiness and righteousness*. *Holiness* is what is right for us to render to God; *righteousness* is what is right for us to render to men. For example, if a man holds back in awe of holy things, and does not reach out to touch and profane divine things as if they were something common, and if he shows all possible honor for things that are precious and worthy of honor, such a man is holy. Likewise he who honors his parents is holy, for the parents are considered "the gods of the household." And if a man is not greedy, and is not an embezzler, nor a thief, nor an adulterer, nor a fornicator, such a man is righteous. Therefore one must serve God in holiness, that is, with piety towards divine things, and with righteousness, that is, with a praiseworthy life in regards to men. And one must serve God *in His sight*, not in the sight of men, as do the people pleasers and hypocrites.

76-80. And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Most High: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto His people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God; by which the Dayspring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace. And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his showing unto Israel. It appears strange that Zacharias should speak to the child as he did; for indeed he

³⁵ See Gen. 22:17.

ought not to have discoursed to an infant who could not understand. But this was an infant who had been brought forth in a strange and wondrous manner, leaping and prophesying in the womb at the coming of Mary. And so it is not at all unbelievable that after his birth he understood the words spoken by his father. "*Thou shalt go before the face of the Lord,*" Zacharias says, "very soon leaving me behind." For Zacharias knew that he was soon to be deprived of his child, who was about to flee into the desert.³⁶ Why was John to *go before*? In order *to prepare the ways of the Lord*. *The ways* are the souls of those in whom the Lord makes His way. The Forerunner, therefore, prepared these souls so that the Lord might walk in them. How did he prepare them? By giving *knowledge of salvation unto His people*. *Salvation* is the Lord Jesus,³⁷ and the knowledge of this *salvation*, that is, the knowledge of Christ, was given by John to the people. For John bore witness to Jesus. Knowledge of Christ came by means of the remission of sins. The Lord would not otherwise have been recognized as God if He had not forgiven the sins of the people. For only God can forgive sins. He forgives us our sins through His *tender mercy*, not through any work of ours, for we have done nothing good. It is He Who *hath visited us from on high*, He Who is called the *Dayspring* because He is the Sun of righteousness. And He has appeared to us who were sitting *in darkness*, that is, in ignorance, and *in the shadow of death*, that is, in sin. There were two evils which held sway over human nature: ignorance of God, the evil to which the pagan Greeks were subject, and sin, the evil to which the Jews were subject, even though they knew God. Therefore God appeared to the human nature, to enlighten those sitting in darkness, that is, those living in ignorance and godlessness, and to enlighten those sitting in the shadow of death, that is, those living in sin. The shadow of death signifies sin for this reason, I believe: just as one's shadow is the companion of one's body, so too, sin is the companion of death. For example, Adam died, and sin was there as well. Not even Christ's death was unaccompanied by sin. When He died, it was for our sins. So it is fitting that sin is called

³⁶ A short time after the birth of Christ, three months later, when Herod was seeking to slay the innocents, Elizabeth and her son fled into the desert to hide, and Zacharias was slain. See *The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints*, Vol. I: *September*, Chrysostom Press, House Springs, Missouri, 1994, pp. 101-102.

³⁷ The name *Jesus* means *salvation*.

the shadow of death, for sin always accompanies death. There is more to be said about this, and we have already mentioned it, I think, when we explained The Gospel According to St. Matthew.³⁸ Does it suffice for God merely to appear to those who are in darkness? No, it does not. But He must also *guide our feet into the way of peace*, that is, into the way of righteousness. Sin is enmity against God,³⁹ but righteousness is peace with God. *The way of peace*, therefore, is a life of righteousness, towards which our souls' "feet" have been guided by Christ Who is the Dayspring from on high. *The child grew* in physical stature, *and waxed strong in spirit*. For the spiritual gift grew together with his body. As the child grew in body, to the same degree did the energies of the Spirit show themselves in him, as he became strong enough to contain them. Why was he in the desert lands? So that he could live out of reach of the wickedness of the masses, and so that he could give his reproofs in boldness, fearing no one. If he had lived in the world, perhaps he would have been stained by friendships and the companionship of men. John was also in the desert, so that when it came time for him to proclaim Christ, he would be believed because he was a desert dweller, living a life beyond that of ordinary men. And he lived in the desert until it pleased God to reveal him to the people of Israel.

³⁸ See Vol. 1, *The Explanation of St. Matthew*, p. 41.

³⁹ See Rom. 8:7.